
JAMES BARR



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BORN 20 March 1924 in Glasgow, Scotland, James Barr was the son of the Reverend Professor Allan Barr, professor of New Testament at the Joint Congregational and United Free Church College in Edinburgh, Scotland, and the grandson of the Reverend James Barr, a Labour member of Parliament 1924–31 and 1935–45. He served during World War II as a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Navy, 1942–45, one highlight of which was his low reconnaissance flight over the Channel during the night leading to D-Day. Following the war, Barr studied at Edinburgh University, completing the M.A. with first-class honors in Classics in 1948 and the B.D. with distinction in Old Testament in 1951. He also received the M.A. from Manchester University in 1969, and the M.A. and D.D. in, respectively, 1976 and 1981 from Oxford University. Over the course of his long academic career ten universities bestowed honorary doctorates on him. He died on 14 October 2006 in Claremont, California, at the age of eighty-two.

In 1950 Barr married Latin scholar Jane J. S. Hepburn. After his ordination in 1951, he served as minister of the Church of Scotland in Tiberias, Israel, in 1951–53, during which time he acquired fluency in both modern Hebrew and Arabic. Later in life he and Mrs. Barr often reminisced about their adventurous times in Israel and the Middle East during those early days before major tourism had developed. In Greece, for example, they were among the first foreigners seen by many Greeks after the war.

Barr's first academic appointment was as professor of New Testament at Presbyterian College, Montreal, in 1953–55, following which he took his first Old Testament position as professor of Old Testament literature and theology at Edinburgh University, 1955–61. He then moved to the United States to teach Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary until 1965. During 1965–76 he was professor of Semitic languages and literatures at Manchester University. His longest tenure occurred at Oxford University, first as Oriel Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture in 1976–78 and then as Regius Professor of Hebrew in 1978–89 (emeritus beginning in 1989). Following a year as the Anne Potter Wilson Distinguished Visiting Professor of Hebrew Bible at Vanderbilt University in 1989–90, he was appointed professor of Hebrew Bible in 1990 and, beginning in 1994, Distinguished Professor of Hebrew Bible at Vanderbilt University, retiring in 1998. Through the years Barr also held visiting professorships at a wide range of universities throughout the world and delivered numerous major lecture series. He was a fellow of the British Academy and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a member of the American Philosophical Society and was affiliated with various other learned societies. He served as president of the Society for Old Testament Study (1973) and

the British Association for Jewish Studies (1978). A festschrift entitled *Language, Theology, and the Bible*, edited by Samuel Balentine and John Barton and published at Oxford University Press, was presented to him in 1994 on his seventieth birthday.

Barr's reputation as one of the most influential biblical scholars and Semitists of the second half of the twentieth century rests on both the range of his interests and the incisive character of his contributions. His first book, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (1961), addressed the linguistic and theological problems associated with transferring a religious tradition from one language into another. Barr scrutinized several widely accepted features of biblical scholarship at the time and demonstrated fundamental flaws underlying each: the notion that there was a basic difference between the Hebrew way of thinking and the Greek way of thinking; the practice of associating the history of a given word with the history of a theological concept; the use made of etymologies; and the philosophical and linguistic underpinnings of much work in "biblical theology." Drawing on principles from the fields of semantics and linguistics, Barr argued that one cannot simply assume—as he shows many have done—that the linguistic structure of a language reveals the thought structures of the people speaking that language. He was especially critical of Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, a widely used multivolume project under way beginning in the 1930s, which Barr found to be all too often guilty of what he called an "illegitimate totality transfer," i.e., the whole range of meanings that a word could have in its various semantic contexts is thought to be present in each individual occurrence of the word. According to Barr, it is much more appropriate to look for theology not in a word but in a sentence or combination of words, a principle that most subsequent scholarly efforts to produce a "theological dictionary" have tried to follow.

Barr published another landmark study on a related problem, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (1968). Here he criticized the widely attested tendency to attribute new meanings to difficult Hebrew words by comparing them to words in other Semitic languages, such as Arabic or Ugaritic. His careful argument had the effect of making subsequent philologists cautious about such speculations, and in a real sense his study put comparative Semitic philology on a new and firmer footing. Barr edited the *Journal of Semitic Studies* during 1965–76 and also served 1974–80 as the editor of the Oxford Hebrew Dictionary project. In addition to his numerous studies of specific Hebrew and Greek words and his work on the history of the Hebrew text and its translation into Greek, he produced a technical and detailed analysis of spelling variations in the Hebrew Bible (1989, based on the Schweich Lectures of 1986 before the British Academy).

While Barr's contributions to the study of biblical language were of direct interest primarily to specialists, his analyses of the role and authority of the Bible in contemporary life had a much wider impact. *The Bible in the Modern World* (1973) dealt with the problem of cultural relativism and the radical questioning of traditional views of the Bible. In a subtle argument that attended to both biblical studies and theology, he sought to show how a modern understanding of Scripture can be theologically and hermeneutically sound when it regards the processes of revelation, tradition, and interpretation in comparable ways for both the biblical and the modern periods. In other studies he focused on the problem of the authority of Scripture and especially the phenomenon of fundamentalism, which he described not simply as a stance toward the Bible but as a particular type of religion and ideology with its own historical roots, its basic principles, and its reasons for such beliefs as biblical inerrancy and literalism. Recognizing that fundamentalism poses serious ecumenical problems among believers, he aimed to develop a perspective on the Bible that is hostile to neither Christian diversity nor critical biblical scholarship. In his final book, *History and Ideology in the Old Testament: Biblical Studies at the End of a Millennium* (2000), he returned to the problem of ideology and culture, but this time with a focus on postmodern biblical studies, which he found to be decidedly problematic in their attitudes and approaches.

Several of his works dealt directly with theological issues connected to the Hebrew Bible. He was intensely critical of the "Biblical Theology Movement" on both linguistic and theological grounds and helped in the 1960s to bring about its demise. In *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (1992, based on the Read-Tuckwell Lectures for 1990 at the University of Bristol), Barr addressed questions of life, death, the soul, and the underworld, emphasizing that parts of the Hebrew Bible imply the naturalness of death and that the ideas of resurrection and immortality are complementary, not in conflict. With *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (1993, based on the 1991 Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University), Barr examined the complex problem of natural theology, finding that the Bible, at least in certain of its texts and assumptions, supports the notion that God is knowable to humans through their humanity in a created world. His final book devoted to the subject was *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (1999), which offered a masterful assessment of the issues and scholars in the debates during the course of the twentieth century.¹

¹The above memoir, to this point in the text, is a slightly revised version of the article by Douglas A. Knight, "James Barr," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John H. Hayes (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 1:98-99 (used by permission).

Some concluding comments about his life in the United States and Canada may provide a useful perspective on this native son of Scotland. The total number of years of residence in North America was significant: fifteen in teaching, divided among Montreal, Princeton, and Nashville, followed by eight in retirement in Claremont. During much of the time in Nashville and Claremont, he and Mrs. Barr retained a home in Oxford and spent summers there or at their vacation home in southern Spain. They often spoke warmly of their various experiences in the United States. In the 1960s, for example, Mr. and Mrs. Barr took their three children on a memorable camping trip, traveling by car all the way from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific and back across the continent to Princeton. That trip, along with fishing and snorkeling in the Florida Keys, was among their fondest memories in later years. Barr loved nature and especially his favorite pastime, bird-watching. Mrs. Barr once said that it remained his "chief form of relaxation, and the one sure way to detach him from his books [was] to draw his attention to a new bird in our backyard."

Mrs. Barr is a Latin scholar in her own right, with a special interest in St. Jerome and his translation of the Bible into Latin. Throughout their years together, Mrs. Barr taught Latin and Greek and remained active in research. She surprised her husband by contributing to his festschrift an article on "Luis de León and the Song of Songs." While they were at Vanderbilt, she offered two seminars in the Divinity School: *Women in Church and Society to 500 C.E.* and *Women in Church and Society from 500 to 1400*. Her students often commented on how enormously valuable the courses were for enhancing their understanding not only of the various attitudes about women but also of the degrees of freedom and influence enjoyed by women during late antiquity and the medieval period.

During their nine years at Vanderbilt, James Barr regularly taught two courses a semester, some at the graduate level and others for general divinity students, including twice the introductory course on the Hebrew Bible. Graduate students benefited especially from studying with him, and many will say that their best graduate memories are from sitting in lectures and seminars with him on the Septuagint, Genesis, Exodus, Psalms, early prophecy, Old Testament Theology and Biblical Theology, advanced Hebrew, Ben Sira, Fundamentalism and Biblical Authority, and Critical Methods of Interpretation. He was also the ideal colleague for those of us teaching in the area, all of us quite junior to him. He regularly participated in the life of the school, attending meetings and lectures and engaging faculty and students in conversations. He also readily shared with us the task of examining graduate students. Altogether, during his tenure at Vanderbilt he sat on the doctoral

committees of sixteen Ph.D. students and served as dissertation director of four of them.

Professor James Barr left his mark on the fields of biblical studies to an extent matched by very few others. His interests and competencies ranged over an exceptionally broad field, and he possessed an uncanny ability to discern structural flaws in the status quo of scholarship. He was revered by students and respected by colleagues in many lands. Those of us who had the good fortune to become close to him will always appreciate his *Menschlichkeit*—his devotion to Mrs. Barr and their three children and grandchildren, his warm personality, his delightful and disarming habit of grinning gleefully and rubbing his hands together when something struck him as especially funny, his taste for a good bottle of beer at lunch, his ease in moving in and out of cultures and languages. We at Vanderbilt—faculty, students, and laity alike—were greatly honored to have had him with us for his last nine years of full-time teaching, and it was gratifying to read his statement in a retrospective on leaving Nashville that “our years here [at Vanderbilt] have been among the choicest of the many gifts that America has given to us.” We, and the entire fields of biblical and Semitic studies, are far the better for James Barr’s presence among us.

Elected 1993; Committee on Lewis Award 1999–2002

DOUGLAS A. KNIGHT

Drucilla Moore Buffington Professor of Hebrew Bible
Vanderbilt University

WORKS

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